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Self-serve cigarette ban sought

Ithaca
Journal
January

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ITHACA — Underage smokers may soon find that getting tobacco products in Tompkins County will be harder than it has been.

"We're trying to get legislation that would put self-service cigarettes and other tobacco products behind the counter of most retailers," said Jean Rightmire, Tompkins County coordinator of the Tompkins-Cortland-Cayuga Tobacco Control Coalition.

Coalition members believe such a requirement would reduce the chances of youth stealing or buying tobacco products. The push to bring such legislation about is being mounted this week as a part of the regional and national Tobacco-Free Awareness Week.

According to a recent poll, about 20 percent of Tompkins County teenagers in ninth to 12th grades get cigarettes by stealing them. According to a survey last year by the coalition, 44 of 77 stores in Tompkins County that sold tobacco products had some form of open access.

"Putting them behind the counter or in a locked case would immediately reduce cases like these," said Rightmire, who added that for those under 18 who try to buy cigarettes illegally, it would "increase the interaction time" and give a store employee greater opportunity to ask for proof of age.

Requiring tobacco products to be put under lock and key or behind a counter is not within the scope of a state mandate but can be legislated by individual counties, said Rightmire. Similar legislation already has been passed in Cortland, Cattaraugus, Erie, Livingston and Genesee counties, and is pending in Cayuga, Tompkins and Oneida. In most cases, according to Rightmire, such legislation is usually initiated by county health departments, then approved by county

legislators.

Such legislation would cover all grocery and convenience stores, including gas stations. It would specifically exclude cigarette machines, bars, restaurants with liquor licenses and stores that sell tobacco as their primary business.

In some states with the rule, stores' sales haven't suffered, losses were cut, and inexpensive cases are used that don't occupy more floor space, Rightmire said.

Currently, many stores here keep cartons of cigarettes behind a counter, but individual packs are on display outside the counter.

"I think it's probably a good idea to put them all behind the counter," said Mike Tanner, manager of Eckerd Drugs on South Meadow Street. He suggested his store would probably act before any legislation was passed.

But Tony Bartos, manager of Chuck's Mobil Station at the corner of Meadow and West State streets, didn't like the idea.

"Accessibility isn't the answer," said Bartos, who viewed the idea as part of the national agenda against smoking, not just an attempt to keep the young from smoking. "There hasn't been a big problem here and self-policing is already in effect and has created a big hassle for those who are of legal age since the state says we have to card anyone who looks younger than 28." Bartos said the proposed law would make it even more time-consuming for those who have a right to smoke to get either a carton or a pack.

"It's also unfair that as sellers we can be penalized \$100 for selling to someone who's underage, but there's no penalty for those kids who try to buy cigarettes illegally," Bartos said. "In some states they can suspend a kid's driver's license for buying cigarettes illegally. That would really be more effective here."

Tobacco-Free Awareness Week

For more information about the hazards of smoking, particularly among young people, contact the Tompkins-Cortland-Cayuga Tobacco Control Coalition at 844-3507.

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